

Charter schools and school reform 3/21/92

Half-measures abound in public school reform. And a half-measure is what Minnesota got when the Legislature enacted a charter school law last year. Now the predicted problems are materializing: Some local school boards are unwilling to relinquish power for school experiments out of their control. The Legislature should amend the law to allow charters to be granted through the state Board of Education as well as the local district.

But while repairing half-measures is perhaps all that the Legislature can get to this session, it must begin planning for full-measure, true educational reform at the next. It must move ahead with implementation of outcome-based education requirements — not because they are cost-free, but because they are good long-term policy. It must lengthen the school year from 170 days toward the 230 or more in other industrial countries. It must open the system to more vocational options.

Doing any of this will require immense budgetary and policy creativity. One incentive is the school finance lawsuit, which, if upheld by the state

Supreme Court this year, will require the Legislature to assert its financial responsibility to every student in the state. It should assert policy responsibility as well.

Charter schools are useful models while deeper structural reforms are taking hold. At least a few individual schools can start the process on their own — trying different curricula, a year-round schedule, longer school days and flexible work rules. Local boards should spend less time fearing them.

But Winona Superintendent Ronald MacIntire made a good point last year when he said: "If the Legislature wants to fix the system, why not give all schools in Minnesota a chance to function without the 1,600 mandates now on the books?" Legislators must look in the mirror. They have the power, and they — not local districts — are the problem. To educate the work force Minnesota needs will take fewer impediments to teaching and a greater commitment to all students, not just those in charter schools.